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ABSTRACT

This paper, a critique of student development as a reform movement in higher education, addresses seven concerns about the student development movement and the model of student affairs that it articulates. First, the paper notes that student development appears focused on the personal development of the individuals seemingly detached from the educational responsibility of the institution of higher learning. Second, the student development movement is described as an unsuccessful attempt to create the substance of an expertise, Third, despite the field's wholesale conversion to student development, it is contended that there is not very much research evidence on the effectiveness of such a conversion. A fourth and related point questions how, if research into student development is at such a primitive stage, student development professionals can assert that their program interventions are effective. A fifth point considers the path from theory to practice. A sixth contends that effective programming may not be replicable in other settings and with other populations. The final point addresses Kuh, Whitt, and Shedd's (1987) monograph, "Student Affairs Work, 2001: A Paradigmatic Odyssey," a work that challenged assumptions upon which the student development movement is based. This document notes in conclusion that student development efforts have not been subjected to a reasoned analysis, making it difficult to determine weaknesses and improve models and practices. (NB)

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STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AS A REFORM MOVEMENT

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(Paper delivered at a symposium presentation, "Professional Leadership in Thought and Practice: A Critique of Student Development," at the national convention of the American College Personnel Association in Atlanta, Georgia on March 19, 1991.)

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In 1986 I wrote a paper that made three points about student development as a reform movement. As a movement it has been characterized by (1) a dearth of dissent en route to its acceptance by the field; (2) a distressing gap between its promise and and present day reality; (3) and a lack of any sort of critical examination of the principles, models, and paradigms that have come to denote student development. Our presentation today is our attempt to begin that critical examination.

The intent of my paper is to critique student development as a reform movement in higher education. It is not my purpose to question the premise that the full growth and development of college and university students is a worthwhile goal - I firmly believe that it is. That said, I'm going to address seven concerns that I have about the student development movement and the model of student affairs that it articulates.

First, student development appears focused on the personal development of the individual seemingly detached from the paramount educational responsibility of our institutions of higher learning. The central role of education and learning is barely acknowledged by either the

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COSPA (Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education [COSPA], 1975) or the T.H.E. student development models (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1975). The tone of these documents, particularly the COSPA statement, is almost non-academic. Colleges just seem to be handy places for young people to develop (grow up). And when we talk about "Human Development as the commonly held core of the profession," (ACPA), 1983, p. 179) are we not by implication abandoning our roots in the student community and higher education? Human beings develop anywhere, in or out of college, with or without professional assistance. Certainly we have not really taken on that broadened responsibility - divorced from the academy?

Second, the student development movement is an unsuccessful attempt to create the substance of an expertise. We have borrowed from developmental psychology to provide a theoretical base for the field; we have coined a properly incomprehensible terminology; we have created several roles for practitioners which, as far as I can determine, exist only in the literature, i.e., campus ecology manager (Banning, 1989), student development educator (Brown, 1989), student development specialist (ACPA, 1975); we have introduced developmental theory and practice into our professional preparation programs; we have produced an increasingly voluminous literature; and we have canonized our gurus, folk heroes, and mythic figures. And yet, despite all of this frantic activity, these many attempts to create a recognizable and coherent discipline,

the rest of the campus doesn't seem very impressed.

As I said over ten years ago (Bloland, 1979): We have cultivated an expertise that was not requested, is not sought out, and for which there is little recognition or demand. Many entry-level and not a few seasoned professionals know little of student development theory and practice and, in fact, do not really need such expertise to meet the role expectations of their supervisors or, in too many instances, their institutions. In a sense, then, it wouldn't really matter how expert we become in our student development specialty - there isn't any campus demand for that expertise.

Third, despite the field's wholesale conversion to student development, there isn't very much research evidence out there that tells us whether it works or not. Should we have committed our destiny as a profession to a paradigm that we are unable to validate? Until research begins to demonstrate that our interventions do indeed bring about the hypothesized, theory-driven effects, we would do well to acknowledge that, for the most part, we are essentially operating in the theater of faith and goodwill rather than on the rules of evidence.

Fourth, if our research into student development is at such a primitive stage, how can we then with any degree of assurance assert that our carefully planned program interventions brought about the desired result? Among all of the competing stimuli on the campus, many of them powerful and uncontrolled, what can be the effect of our

planned program interventions, lasting a couple of hours, or days at the most.

Imagine a developmental vector, say Chickering's task of developing purpose (Chickering, 1969) as operationalized by the SDTI-2 (Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1979) subtask of mature career plans. Using this vector as the theory base for our program, we assess the current status of a student population via the SDTI-2, zap them with a program running for two hours once a week for three months, and then retest with the SDTI-2 in the final session. Are these students now more capable of developing mature career plans? They may well be more knowledgeable because of the cognitive content of the workshop but to say that they have integrated the lessons learned into their developing personalities and characters so that they have made a developmentally significant or lasting shift is presumptuous to say the least.

That said, let me add that building programs on the basis of developmental theory is as good a method of planning student programs as any other and will probably result in no serious harm to the participants. The student participants may learn from it, just as they do from a class in accounting or organic chemistry, but to claim that our six-hour program has jolted the students into accelerated and significant growth on this dimension is at best premature and, at worst, fatuous. I don't think that this model is going to impress our academic colleagues or provosts very much.

Fifth, I will grant that the introduction of developmental theory hasn't actually hurt anyone to the best of my knowledge, and may have lent a note of intellectual plausibility to the student affairs enterprise. However, the path from theory to practice is so fraught with unexplained variance and the variables so complex that I'm not certain any more that theory has added much of practical value to student affairs programming that wasn't present before. In fact it may well have complicated the process of programming without materially improving it.

Sixth, I am concerned also about the "law of universal applicability," a hypothetical law which states that any specific developmental theory or theory-based intervention ought to apply to most institutions or to most situations. If there is indeed a student development effect it may apply only to a particular type of college that has defined its mission and goals appropriately, or only to narrowly-focused programs, or only to first year 18-year old students, or only when the moon is full. There may be no generalized student development effect at all which means that any attempt to identify the developmental potency of a college environment, with its many often conflicting internal stimuli, is fishing in barren waters. Or perhaps we will learn that theory X will work only under certain specified and highly artificial circumstances, not readily replicable.

And, Seventh, if these weren't problem enough, Kuh, Whitt, and Shedd (1987), in their provocative monograph, "Student Affairs Work, 2001: A Paradigmatic Odyssey", really

shook the old apple tree by challenging a series of basic assumptions upon which the student development movement is based. I've just been picking away at the surface. They practically threw it out.

In their monograph, Kuh, Whitt, and Shedd have contrasted two paradigms: one, the conventional paradigm or Old Story, is mechanistic and linear, characterized by objectivity, control, and causality. It is being replaced in their view by the emergent paradigm, or New Story, which is characterized by conditions of uncertainty, mutual shaping, ambiguity, and multiple realities. Citing the emergent paradigm, two of their challenged assumptions are particularly relevant to this critique.

For example, we have assumed that "human development is patterned, orderly, and predictable (Kuh et al., 1987, p. 32) but the emergent paradigm says that development is not as orderly or predictable as we have thought. Every student is unique and develops at different rates and the pattern of that development cannot be anticipated or predicted.

Kuh and company then proceeded to turn the second assumption upside down, i.e., that "student affairs staff can systematically design and implement interventions to intentionally facilitate students' development" (p. 35) that "intervention is better than nonintervention" (p. 35) and that "proaction is preferable to reaction" (p. 35). But if student development is not as predictable and orderly as we have always assumed, how can proactive and systematic program interventions bring about any specific and intended

developmental change? Developmental change is more likely to be linked to chance than to our theory-based interventions.

What does this emergent paradigm, assuming that it is real, mean to student affairs staff, particularly those who work within the student development paradigm? Kuh et al. stated that we must not succumb to the tendency to try to influence or to understand the complex behavior of students and colleagues in terms that are too simple or mechanistic We are faced with not one reality, but multiple realities and no one or even several theories working in concert will suffice.

Kuh et al. went on to state that "student development theory provides the illusion of exerting control over what is essentially an indeterminate, unpatterned process" (p. 45) Theory is useful to "anticipate and respond to certain issues that seem to be typical of students at different ages" (p. 45) but we shouldn't let our understanding of theory blind us to the unanticipated variety of behaviors that can actually occur. "We must shed the conventional notion that development can be facilitated or somehow engineered" (p. 50), and we must become comfortable with conflict, chance, and unpredictable and evolutionary change. Of course, Kuh, Whitt, and Shedd may simply be positioning themselves as the leaders of yet another reform cycle but, if they are correct, the current student development paradigm may be leading us all down the garden path and that what we claim to be able to do with theory-based program

interventions may be completely off-base.

These are my seven points. I could have listed more but these will suffice to point out some concerns that I have had with the evolution of the student development movement and concerns that we all ought to be aware of or at least to consider. It is only by holding these assumptions and precepts up to daylight that we can begin to make an informed assessment of the dominant movement in student affairs. We may indeed be on the right track but, since we have not subjected student development to a reasoned and penetrating analysis, we are not aware of the weaknesses and thus do not know how to correct or improve our models and practices.

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